

THE LONE RANGER

An Interview with Hermógenes Pérez de Arce

By Alan Hootnick

There is no other political commentator in Chile capable of provoking such fury in the Concertación as Hermógenes Pérez de Arce. His weekly column in *El Mercurio* can part the seas of humanity: he is either acclaimed as Chile's political Moses, or he is denounced as a "dinosaur," a "fascist," a "monio," or even worse epithets which we cannot print. He is the nightmare of the leftists, the Defender of the Conservative Faith, and the Prophet of Doom crying out in the wilderness against political hypocrisy. He has always chosen the most "politically incorrect" causes to defend, such as the Pinochet case. While the government, the media and most politicians were content to watch Pinochet hang and twist slowly in the wind in London, Hermógenes wrote fiery books and scathing columns castigating the shameful abdication of duty to defend Chilean sovereignty. In brief, he is proud to be known as Chile's Lone Ranger.

But, the best-kept secret about Hermógenes Pérez de Arce is that he may in fact be a "quiet moderate."

Hermógenes received *News Review* with gentlemanly courtesy in his exquisitely appointed private office. His inner sanctum is a reflection of his inner personality: classic, sculptured furniture in warm

dark tones and tranquil green walls visually express his cool, rational thought processes. And in combination with his enormous library of literary treasures, the atmosphere speaks of his desire to live the values of a higher culture founded upon ennobling spiritual values. His soothing vocal tones and his graceful phrases are definitely not the voice of a rabble-rousing radical. His facial lines may reflect a lifetime of political battles, but his inner faith in culture has utilised his experiences as a way of growing even stronger spiritually. His remarkably well-preserved physique is maintained in part by weekend football matches. "In the Sub-70 age group," he explained.

"I have always been a Lone Ranger, even going back to 1973 when I was elected to the Chamber of Deputies, and I warned about the dangers of socialism and where we were headed as a country," he stated proudly with a glint in his dark penetrating eyes framed by expressive jet-black eyelashes.

He ran for Senator in Santiago Oriente in 1989, but his campaign never got off the ground. It was best symbolised by his dirigible that he tried to launch at a political rally which was so full of hot air that it choked and spluttered and flopped back to the ground like

a mad scientist's invention which couldn't fly. "But Sebastian Piñera, who beat me out, said to me later: 'you ended up the big winner in the end, because you are now more influential as an independent out of office writing your columns than you would have been had you been elected.'"

BEHIND ENEMY LINES

Hermógenes has recently caused uproar with his columns, accusing the Chilean military of "abandoning its wounded soldiers behind enemy lines," in reference to the official policy of dissociating the military from the officers on trial for human rights abuses. "With the exception of the Letelier and the Tucapel Jiménez cases - which were exemplary judicial processes - the rest of the trials have been a farce. They have not followed any normal judicial process. The accused are not even interrogated before they are indicted. They trump up charges in order to force the defendants to testify in bigger cases. In the Prats Case, the judge in Argentina even admitted to the officer she jailed that she knows he is innocent, but she wants to force him to testify about Operación Condor. This is judicial extortion! But the Chilean Armed Forces have remained silent. I would have expected more from them. They should have convened the National Security Council to denounce the illegalities and lack of due process in these trials. They have also remained silent about the legal fiction of 'ongoing kidnapping' which certain judges have invented in order to bypass the Amnesty Law.

"What most people don't realise is that the Concertación never intended to repeal the Amnesty Law, because they understood very well that, under Chile's legal system, repealing such a law could not have retroactively allowed the cases to be reopened. So the

judges gradually accepted the legal fiction of 'ongoing kidnapping' as invented by the human rights lawyers. Even Judge Juan Guzmán five years ago stated that he would close the case if the bodies appeared, but since then he has in fact indicted defendants for homicide as soon as the corpses were found. To paraphrase Clausewitz: Politics is the art of war by other means."

The Pinochet Case became a great cause for both sides of the political spectrum and propelled Hermógenes to centre stage during the course of Pinochet's calvary in London. Much has been written about the case, but it still seems to be a mystery as to why Pinochet travelled to London in the first place. According to Hermógenes, it was not exactly an ambush but more a case of being lulled into a false sense of security. "As soon as Pinochet retired from the Army and entered the Senate, he wanted to realise his desire to travel. He travelled throughout Europe, including an earlier visit to London. On that first trip, the then Chilean Ambassador to Britain, Hernán Errázuriz Talavera, got wind of a judicial order brewing, and he whisked Pinochet out of the country just in time. But Pinochet was so confident of his supposed diplomatic immunity as an ex-Chief of State that he really saw no danger in going to London in order to have a spinal operation." Lulling your adversary into a false sense of security is a common tactic of psychological warfare, as explained in a previous article in *News Review* about the October 1973 Middle East War.

CURRENT CONTROVERSIES

Another recent controversy involving Pinochet has been drummed up by the memoirs of former Air Force Commander-in-Chief Fernando Matthei who accuses Pinochet, on the night



Hermógenes Pérez de Arce, illustration by Lorena Riquelme

of the 1988 Plebiscite, of wanting to throw out the voting results - which showed a clear victory for the NO option - and declaring martial law in order to try to cling to power against the will of the people. According to Matthei, who was a member of the Junta at the time, it was only his fervent opposition that prevented this sinister plan to steal the plebiscite. But according to Hermógenes, Matthei's thesis is totally unsubstantiated. "Matthei has been refuted by every one of the other witnesses to the Junta meetings that night. In fact, it would have been absolutely impossible to commit a voter fraud given all of the checks and supervision set up by the government itself. There was never any thought about ignoring the results if the NO won. American Ambassador Harry Barnes stated that Mónica Jiménez (a Concertación activist) told him that Vice-Commander in Chief Sinclair told her that the gov-

ernment was not going to recognise a victory of the NO. But I asked Mónica about that charge, and she told me she never really said that - all that Sinclair was talking about were normal security plans in case of terrorist bombings. The government all along was prepared to accept the results even if the NO won."

The hottest political crisis in years has been the Spiniak case and the allegations that certain Senators in the UDI were involved in paedophilia and other sordid orgies in Spiniak's parties. Even though Pia Guzmán referred to "two Senators from the Alianza and on Christian Democrat," all of the attention has been focused upon the UDI Senators. "The media know the name of the Christian Democrat Senator, but they have kept his name secret, although they have smeared the names of two UDI Senators. I don't think Pia Guzmán intend-

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